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Justin Hoover is a secondary education major with a concentration in social studies and the goal of teaching U.S. History and Government in public high schools. Hoover has previously studied musical theory and composition as well as having learned several different instruments. His interest in music is also reflected in his study of American culture and cultural development, specifically in how music reflects cultural values, ideas, and norms.

Pop Music Should Change

The year was 1990. The Hubble Space Telescope was launched, Germany was reunified, and rapper Vanilla Ice, or Robert Van Winkle, had just released his debut album *To the Extreme*. Ice's album shot up right to the top of the charts, especially its first track, "Ice Ice Baby," considered to be the most recognizable song of Winkle's career. With a simple beat, memorable lyrics, and plenty of classic 90s dance moves, "Ice Ice Baby" became a huge step for the hip hop genre, which did not have much success on the charts before. The song was a genuine hit.

However, as it became more famous, criticisms began to pile up. After all, something about it sounded oddly familiar. It was not very long until people drew similarities between "Ice Ice Baby" and Queen and David Bowie's "Under Pressure", especially in the seemingly identical basslines. When Vanilla Ice was questioned about it, he stated "They're not the same bassline. [Their song] goes do do do da da doo do... do do do da da doo do. Our song

goes: do do do da da doo do... DA do do do da da doo do.”
(Heartwich).

While this is just a silly story about two songs that were just too similar, it still raises the question of originality in the pop industry. It is undeniable that there are talented performers and artists working in the industry who create unique and stylish works, but what about cases like Vanilla Ice and “Under Pressure”? With an ever growing rate of copyright infringement cases in music (USC), is pop music as a genre truly reaching its potential? In this paper, I will discuss the trends in current pop music, why they are happening, and whether or not they are allowing pop music to provide the best quality of music to audiences.

Pop Music as a Landscape

Pop music is exactly what it sounds like: popular music. It is whatever audiences like at that moment in time. In the early 1990’s, pop was more like hip hop, like Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer. Towards the mid 90s, however, pop sounded more like grunge rock-and-roll music, like Nirvana and the Grateful Dead. Then, in the late 90s, radio stations were overflowing with boy-bands, like NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys. Pop is an ever-changing landscape that molds to an ever-changing audience (Dewall, cf. Thompson).

Today, pop is fixated on a new style of music: trap music. As the *New York Times*’ Jon Pareles notes in his survey of pop music in 2017, trap music has just recently breached the mainstream charts, coming from the southern rap scene in the early 2000’s. Known for its drum machines, frustrated lyrics, and quick tempos, this style now dominates the charts regularly, giving

a new generation of artists a way to express themselves. The rise of trap music has even caused artists from all over pop to start using elements of this style in their own songs as well, Taylor Swift being a perfect example given her recent album, *Reputation*. (Pareles).

That borrowing of styles, however, is becoming a problem. While it is valuable and vital for artists to borrow ideas from each other, today's music seems more focused on conforming to what is popular, not borrowing to create something unique (Evans). A recent study by Joan Serrà, a postdoctoral scholar at the Artificial Intelligence Research Institute of the Spanish National Research Council in Barcelona, found that the pop industry is experiencing a “homogenization of the overall timbral palette”, timbre being a song's general sound and musical identity. Serrà's research also shows that pop music today has had the same harmonic qualities and pitch tendencies for the past almost 60 years. In other words, artists are limited to using the same techniques for writing melodies, harmonies, and every other aspect of songwriting that artists were using the 1960's, leaving no room for current artists to have their own identity (Matson).

To say that pop music all sounds the same nowadays is somewhat of a cliché, something spouted off by an angry grandparent at the head of the Thanksgiving dinner table or a pretentious millennial who only listens to “artistic” (read: squirm-inducing) indie music. However, given the research, do these claims have any substance? Is pop music droning on blindly repeating itself? To fully understand the question, we have to look into what exactly is happening in the pop industry today.

Trends: Lyrics

The heartbeat of many pop songs today is in its lyrics. Lyrics have become significantly more common in pop than they were when pop was ‘born’ in the 1940’s and 1950’s (Dewall, Evans). They serve as poetic reflections of society and what it values. However, according to Dr. William Briggs of Cornell University, while word count is rising, word uniqueness is dropping. Analyzing lyrics from 1950 on, Briggs found that lyrics have shifted from being a wide spectrum of words with variety of simplicity or complexity, to a plain where most lyrics are just hovering at same complexity level (Briggs).

A change in perspective in lyric writing has swept the industry lately. In a recent study, C. N. Dewall, R. S. Pond Jr., W. K. Campbell, and J. M. Twenge took the top ten songs on the Billboard Top 100 for the past several years and analyzed the language the artists used. What they found was a growing use of first-person singular nouns over first-person plural nouns. In other words, songs today are more likely to use the words “I”, “me”, or “my” instead of “we”, “us”, or “our”. This marks a huge change for the pop industry. Just like any literature, the perspective of the writer will steer the course of the writer’s subject matter, and the results of this new perspective were found when DeWall and his team discovered the increasingly antisocial mood of modern pop lyrics. Many lyrics today describe other people as being untrustworthy or, in some cases less significant. While a shift to artists focusing on themselves could allow for lyrics to show deep introspective thought, it usually lends itself to narcissism and isolationism instead (DeWall).

Other researchers have noticed pop's increased disillusionment with the typical modern lifestyle. In Jon Pareles' *New York Times* article mentioned earlier, he notes how common it has become for songs to talk in a dissatisfied way. For example, one of the top artists of 2017, Lil Uzi Vert, wrote the chorus: "Push me to the edge/All my friends are dead" as the chorus of his song "XO Tour Llif3", using it as a mantra for his album *Luv Is Rage 2*. Lyrics like this are very common in pop music now, as artists now scream their frustration with the establishment of our society almost in unison (Pareles). Adding to this growing sense of dissatisfaction, swearing and crudity are being used more and more every single year (Briggs). Artists' dissatisfaction towards life is then amplified with bitter language, making their message clear: "we are tired of the same-old-same-old".

Trends: Musicality

While, lyrically, the changes may be more direct, it is much more difficult to find the changes that pop has been making in terms of songwriting. While the instruments have become more technological, making the songs sound different from other eras, the general writing style and structure has stayed the same.

Returning to Joan Serrà and his research, Serrà's team's conclusion is drawn from a multitude of factors regarding the way music is written and performed. One major discovery of Serrà and his team is the ever decreasing versatility of instrumentation. Aside from technological advancements made to some instruments, the lineup of instruments used in pop are more or less the same as they were in the 1960's (Matson). Similarly, Hannah Evans of *The Independent* wrote of the "unusual signs of conformity in pop

music”, claiming that pop hasn’t changed from the mold of 50’s and 60’s rock-n-roll, with its “chart-friendly” three to five minute duration, simple “hook-chorus” structure, and typical chord progression writing (Evans).

How can this happen? How can a major artform with such a large audience and so many artists working stagnate for close to 60 years? Why is pop not changing? Why is timbral variety not growing, but shrinking?

It could possibly be because a large majority of songs are being written by the same few people. In Hannah Evans’ *The Independent* article, “Why Does Today’s Pop Music Sound the Same? Because the Same People Make It,” she details how the industry is almost single-handedly being controlled by people like Fraser T. Smith, Britney, Kylie, and Leona Lewis, Keane and Ellie Goulding, and Greg Kurstin. While these names may be unfamiliar, they can be found on the top songs on the Billboard Top 100 over the past several years, latched on as their writers. With this select few writing almost all of the most successful songs, variety is downplayed because we only have these few different styles to choose from (Evans).

Not only are the big chart-topping songs being written by the same few people, but they are also being produced by the same few producers. Companies like Maratone and producers like DJ “Dr. Luke” keep a monopoly on the industry by easily and consistently summitting the charts, leaving other producers and other companies to have no choice but to try to copy their styles just to make a profit. Allowing a select few to control the course of pop creates a never ending loop of artists, not trying to create

something individual and unique, but endlessly copying each other just to keep up (Evans, cf. Thompson).

Labels in the music industry today are obsessed with making sure that they stay safe, viewing music as a product instead of art. Take for example the app, Shazam. With the app monitoring 20 million of its own searches every day, Shazam has become a tool for labels to use to find out which songs become hits and when. After so many years of monitoring apps like Shazam, labels can now predict *why* songs become hits to a degree. Years have passed since labels started monitoring these apps, and by now it is down to a science. Labels will search for trends in current hit songs and produce music that capitalizes on those trends, so that their songs will be more marketable. Essentially, this creates a process similar to making copies of copies endlessly, with labels exhaustively creating slight variations on popular trends. What we are left with then is just the same generic template with no room for anything else (cf. Matson, Thompson).

Why Does this Matter?

In the words of Dewall, Pond Jr., Campbell, and Twenge, music is a cultural product, meaning that it is custom fit for the people who listen to it (DeWall). When we, as the audience, listen to music, we need to be conscious of what it reflects on us as a society. Today's music reflects dissatisfaction, anger, and laziness instead of creativity. While human beings are meant to be creative creations, we relegate music to being just a commodity. Music is meant to be an expression of creativity, but when we try to exploit it by making it more marketable instead of letting it naturally develop, we pilot it in directions that make it less effective. Pop has been turned into a

formula where artists only need to plug in for ‘x’ and ‘y’ with whatever made the last hit sell (cf. Evans, cf. Thompson). No wonder the lyrics of pop music are so disillusioned; there is nowhere for artists to go. Pop has written itself into a corner. Though all the possibilities of the musical palette are at the artists’ fingertips, they have trapped themselves into this spot on the timbral spectrum (Matson).

Pop music should be a playground of creativity, given how wide its audience is, but it holds itself back, and now people are starting to get bored. In a survey by *Time Magazine*, Lily Rothman asked participants what they thought of pop music, and the majority of people stated they believed pop is the worst it has ever been (Rothman).

Some will still say there is no reason to change, after all, revolutionary artists like ‘The Beatles’ were criticized in their day for being the very things that pop music is usually criticized for today: being repetitive, boring, and meaningless (cf. Manzoor, Rothman). However, that logic is incomplete. It does not account for one thing: time. When ‘The Beatles’ were criticized, they were still a part of a movement that was changing the way music was performed and written. Music today, however, is not doing the same. Musicians today are not revolutionizing anything; they are not creating new ways to write or perform songs. Instead, they are staying within the boundaries of what came before. While ‘The Beatles’ were part of the rock-n-roll movement that was trying to change style and harmonic content, modern artists have not moved past what ‘The Beatles’ were doing. Sixty years have passed, however, and if there was ever a point to call for more variety, it is

now. This era of pop chases after trends while hiding under the shadow of what has been done before limiting artists' and audiences' scope of what music could be.

Conclusion

In light of all the data, music is not living up to its potential. Instead, it is only providing the bare minimum. The genre is following trends that lead to homogenization of style, sound, and substance for the sake of greater marketability and an easier writing process. Because of these factors, music is becoming more conformist, less inventive, and less risky. Music today is all about formulas to make the next hit song. However, if those formulas are all based on the last big hit song, then pop music is going nowhere. It is not getting any better, nor is it getting any worse, it is just repeating itself.

What should people do then? What can people do to change the course of the music industry? The answer is actually very simple: be a little more selective with the music you listen to. Like in all economics, the consumer controls the market. Record labels monitor which songs become hits and which songs do not. The problem is that the wrong songs are becoming hits, and record labels are losing money on songs that take legitimate risks. So do not only listen to music that just sounds decent. Instead, find music that is impressive artistically but still enjoyable for your taste and labels will notice.

Music is a powerful, vivid, colorful art, and we should allow it to be. The risks and gambles of the creative process are what make music exciting to listen to. Without risks, we've torn the soul out of music. Music today is a very limited spectrum, but imagine

if we could allow it to be a full kaleidoscope the way it is meant to be. Imagine the colors we could experience. If we allow music to keep being bland, there will be so much wonder we will miss out on. The entire scope of music is in our hands, and it is waiting to be unlocked. It is our job now to look beyond entertaining ourselves, and look for stimulating music that uses human imagination with all its fire and force. Let's create an environment where creativity, passion, and artistic choice transport us to musical vistas we cannot begin to imagine.

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